



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

I am Curious (Yellow) by Vilgot Sjöman; Goran Lindgren
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ing of one of his deputies, he raids the place in force and destroys it, behaving himself much like Kozlik. Marketa escapes with an eccentric itinerant monk, and wanders back to the convent where she was supposed to have lived out her life; but even in her now desperate straits she prefers life with Mikolas. In the meantime, however, he has attempted a rescue raid on the fortress jail where his father is imprisoned, and is wounded and seized. Marketa comes to him and they are married, as a kind of gesture against his fate.

Marketa Lazarova is a fascinating and powerful film, but it is extremely long and its uncompromising brutality makes it hardly a crowd-pleaser; it demands endurance from its viewers, like participants in a strange rite. The dark, low-key lighting, which modulates from crepuscular to half-shadow and back again, gives a subtle rhythm within episodes. Cryptic bardic titles before each episode announce (often wryly) what is about to happen, on which the chorus also comments. The stylistic vigor is remarkable; Vlacil's camera work is as strong and active as Kurosawa's in *Seven Samurai*. Like *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, that other extraordinary recent film from Eastern Europe, *Marketa Lazarova* draws upon remote historical sources to create a film with surprising contemporary impact. It asks us to see what man was, under his fur cloaks, crouched by the fire while the wolves circled his stone forts; but the question reverberates to what man is, under his nylon and rayon, crouched by the TV in his steel-and-glass apartment house.

—EMORY MENEFFEE and ERNEST CALLENBACH

I AM CURIOUS (YELLOW)

Director: Vilgot Sjöman. Camera: Peter Wester. Producer: Goran Lindgren. Grove Press Films.

In our times the medium which can present social comment in the most convincing (and moving) fashion is the motion picture. But because of concern for the box office, or because of the particular artistic-dramatic inclinations of film authors, the social comment in

most films is indirect. Obviously directors such as Godard, Buñuel, Antonioni, and Bergman are intimately and vitally interested in the complex issues of our times. But their works approach these issues in the voices of allegory and fantasy—in a word, in the voices of fiction. The films in which direct social comment is a main issue and fiction a parallel or secondary device are rare. *I Am Curious* are two exceptions. Or is one exception, depending on how you view them. For *I Am Curious* has been released as two films, but, in reality, are one film. Just as *Remembrance of Things Past* is really a single, unified work, so is *I Am Curious*.

One of the contradictions of our times is that movies are aimed at the young (note the statistics on the age of movie-goers) but that they are made, distributed, reviewed, and censored by the middle-aged or the old. *I Am Curious* is a young people's film made by a cynical, hopeful, questioning, middle-aged director who describes himself in the titles as "Vilgot Sjöman, young film director, age 42." All of the principal participants in the venture he describes as "young," as long as they are of the questioning left.

Anyone with half a mind knows we are living in a time when the status quo is being severely questioned by people of a wide range of persuasions—conservatives, liberals, activists, and the like. Although Sjöman's referents are particular to Sweden, they are nonetheless universal. The status quo, the Establishment, in Sweden, looks, I suppose, to the outsider like a kind of demi-paradise; it has the characteristic common to all demi-paradises of engendering satisfaction, complacency, and apathy. Sweden is a socialist monarchy (more accurately, a constitutional monarchy) and a social-monarchy is a self-evident contraction in terms. The Social Democrats have been in power for more than thirty years. Instead of being a party of the left, they are now regarded as a party of the center. The conservatives and the liberals have, over the years, moved closer to the center and to each other. Thus, there is no

organized dissent. For an analogy, consider the similarities of the Democratic and Republican Parties and the lack of organized dissent in the United States.

It is into this quiet pool of placidity that Sjöman has flung his film. According to Sjöman's own account, he went to Sandrews (the producing and distributing organization) and asked for 100,000 meters (over 300,000 feet) of film and a free hand. He got both.

I Am Curious is a film within a film. On the surface this might appear to be an artificial, time-worn device. But it works. Sjöman uses it for one kind of purpose in *Yellow* and for quite another in *Blue*. In the *Yellow* film the dual roles of the actors are kept quite separate from each other, but in the *Blue* film they begin to merge until actor and role become almost indistinguishable.

The principal role in both is played by a drama student, Lena Neyman, age 23. Lena is a kook. At least in the *Yellow* film she is. In the *Blue* film she is something quite different—but more of that later.

Lena the kook lives in a room in her father's apartment. The room is filled with an incredible array of book cases, disorganized files, posters, little shrines, sound-recording equipment, and other things too numerous to catalogue. Hanging on the wall is a black bag labelled "The Social Conscience of Democracy." Into it she stuffs all manner of things. The audience is asked to guess what it contains. Lena's room reminds one of the old bargeman's cabin in Jean Vigo's film, *L'Atalante*.

From this room Lena sallies forth to be a social irritant. On occasion she and her friends picket the U.S. Embassy, the Russian Embassy, the airline transporting vacationers to Franco's Spain, the Church, and other such institutions as strike her fancy. On other occasions she goes forth with a tape-recorder slung over her shoulder to ask questions, questions, questions. In this level of activity Lena is a vehicle Sjöman uses to express the questions in his own mind about social problems in Sweden. The scenes of Lena the picketer-questioner are handled in a fashion much like that of social documentaries such as we see on U.S. network public program-

ming. But Lena is also developed as a human being, particularly in the *Blue* film, and thus enables Sjöman to probe more deeply.

Her father and mother are both working-class, low-income people. Her mother deserted her father (Rune) some years back for unspecified reasons. Her father works in a picture-framing shop and quite evidently does not understand Lena—or much of anything else for that matter. Lena focuses her resentment of Rune on the fact that his one good deed—going to Spain to fight in the civil war—came to naught. After three weeks with the International Brigade he returned and is unable to answer when Lena asks him why. Clearly he himself does not know.

Lena gets involved with Börje, a purposeless, rather shady young man whom her father brings home one day. All of the highly publicized sex in the *Yellow* film occurs between Börje and Lena. Sex is an integral part of the development and disintegration of their relationship.

The story of Lena's relationship with Börje in the "internal" film is set in the matrix of the story of Lena's emotional and sexual relationship with Sjöman, the director, in the "external" film. By the time he is well into the *Yellow* film, Sjöman is weaving together at least three major elements on the first level of perception: direct social comment and two sets of emotional relationships. And by this time his social comment is both direct and indirect. These are not simple works.

Lena, the social dissident, first espouses the cause of a classless society. Then in the story of the making of the film we see her observing Sjöman as he interviews Olof Palme, then Minister of Transport (now Minister of Education). Palme states his views about the lack of and the desirability of a classless society, while Lena irritates Sjöman by necking with Magnus, actor and her slave, while Sjöman and Palme talk.

Later, in the editing room at Sandrews, Lena says to Sjöman, "I can't stand listening to Palme. I don't get what he's talking about." Sjöman then runs for her, on the Moviola, an earlier interview with Martin Luther King on the subject of nonviolence. Lena is fascinated by Dr.

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King. Her comment is, "I like him. He talks about better things than Palme."

Sjöman uses this incident as a transition to the next sequence (in the film within the film) in which Lena takes up the cudgels for non-violence. By this, and by a number of other devices, Sjöman keeps the differentiation between levels of reality extremely fuzzy. Extraordinarily skillful handling of ambiguity is one of his abilities. As the two films progress, the involvements with each other of the characters in the film and in the film within the film begin to merge and the viewer is less and less able to maintain in his own mind a clear-cut differentiation between levels of reality. But Sjöman does create the impression that Lena's espousal of the cause of nonviolence stemmed from her viewing of the King interview. (In the *Blue* film an entirely different impression is created.) Anyway, the overt social commentary in the balance of the *Yellow* film is about nonviolence. Sjöman actually creates a hypothetical non-violent foreign policy for Sweden which remains in force throughout the balance of the film.

Sjöman inserts the story of the development of the relationship between Börje and Lena as a sort of interlude in the searching social probing which takes place with Lena, the social dissident.

After their first encounter Börje and Lena spend the night together, then get up very early in the morning and go out in the deserted streets of Stockholm. We hear Lena in a voice-over monologue which sounds rather like "Under Milkwood" shifted to Stockholm.

... Now the Prime Minister gets up to take care of Sweden.

And the Minister of Trade wakes up
And all the lefties

And the whole mixed economy

The conservative party leader rubs his eyes
because he's had a nightmare

And Torsten Erickson gets up and makes
pee-pee and begins devising another defense
of the new State Prison at Kumla*

*Here Sjöman is laying groundwork for the *Blue* film which takes up the question of the State Prison in depth.



Vilgot Sjöman and Lena Nyman: I AM CURIOUS.

And Per Wrigstad vomits again in *Expressen*.

Lena and Börje then proceed to have intercourse (sexual, not social) on a balustrade in front of the Royal Palace. In his testimony at the obscenity trial regarding *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, the Reverend Howard Moody ventures the opinion that at this point in the film Lena and Börje are saying "Screw the government." And it is indeed clear that Sjöman several times uses sex for satirical purposes. Witness, for example, the encounter in the "largest tree in Europe. Fourteen meters in circumference. 2,000 years old." And the romp in the pond.

We learn that Börje is living with Marie, by whom he has a child. And we are told that Börje and Marie are not married. Lena learns these facts from her father. (Is Rune being intentionally cruel? Or does he again not understand his daughter?) Lena goes to the country for a "retreat" in which she meditates, diets, and does exercises such as practice in understanding dialectic, yoga, self-denial and the like.

During the sequence of Lena attempting yoga exercises (she can't do them very well) the film crew comes out from behind the camera to help her. In a charming comedy sequence each member of the crew demonstrates a different exercise—over these are superimposed the technical credits. Then we go back to the story of Lena and Börje. Börje has fol-

lowed Lena to her retreat—upon which he intrudes. This encounter between Börje and Lena ranges from wild sexuality to bitter recriminations. Lena is furious with Börje, not because he has other women in his life but because he has not been honest with her about them. What she does not realize is that Börje is incapable of honesty. (In the *Blue* film she isn't so honest herself.)

The final sexual encounter is almost a form of rape since, while consent is implied, joy is absent. Here again, the film crew intrudes. By this device Sjöman seems to be trying to soften for the audience the agonizing quality of the fight between Lena and Börje. "Really," he seems to be saying, "it isn't really real."

Sjöman seems to do this to keep the question of sexual relations a subdominant theme in the *Yellow* film. This softening that takes place serves to make dominance of the sexual theme in the *Blue* film more forceful.

This last encounter between Lena and Börje begins with sexual intercourse which is interrupted for a screaming, acrimonious fight. The sequence of events culminates in a final sexual intercourse which is really a continuation of the fight, with Börje trying to establish sexual dominance over Lena.

Börje leaves, and on the last night of her retreat, Lena dreams that she has tied to a tree her 23 previous lovers and that she then shoots Börje and castrates him.

The violence of her reaction to Börje destroys Lena's confidence in her ability to practice non-violence. She rushes to a baker's shop and gorges herself on extraordinarily calorific pastries. This is in contrast to her diet of water for breakfast, three peas for lunch, and a carrot for dinner while on retreat.

Sjöman then makes the point that although Lena has fallen along the wayside, the idea will continue.

Next we see a short reprise of the nonviolence idea, with specific reference to the Bomb. Following that, a short sequence in which Lena informs Börje that she has scabies. (In the *Blue* film she says she has crabs.) It turns out, of course, that Börje has the same affliction.

But the conflict between the two is constantly interrupted by Sjöman the director, who is apparently jealous of Lena's affection for Börje (the actor) which has developed during the filming. Sjöman gets his revenge by subjecting both to the indignity of going through the treatment for scabies under the watchful eye of the camera.

Sjöman and Lena end their relationship and Lena and Börje (as the actors, not the characters in the film within the film) go off together as happy, contented lovers. Ha! Wait till you see the *Blue* film.

I Am Curious (Yellow), although a film with many levels, is nevertheless a rather restrained, non-threatening film because its treatment is largely satirical. This allows the viewer to maintain a kind of protective social distance. There are, of course, many moments of real poignancy in which the characters come through as real human beings who bleed when stuck with a knife. But the satire often comes perilously close to burlesque, as in the cake-eating sequence. Sjöman seems to be taking away from us our opportunity to participate in Lena's suffering over her loss of faith. But this only heightens the effect of the *Blue* film in which Sjöman pulls no punches.

The whole of the *Yellow* film is played from the perspective of Sjöman's view of Lena. He is constantly putting her down as a kind of well-meaning idiot child. Early in the film, for example, he says, "It's a damn shame that Lena doesn't understand politics. But, God, drama students!"

Throughout the film Lena is Sjöman's instrument, a glass through which he is showing the audience his view of Swedish socialism, "... the two heads of Swedish socialism: the big self-satisfied head and the little shrunken one." To the extent that she is developed as a person in the *Yellow* film, the view Sjöman shows us is of Lena in her relationships to the men in her life—Sjöman himself; Börje, her lover; Rune, her father; Magnus, her slave; Yevtushenko and Martin Luther King, her mentors. In her relationships with these men, Lena is constantly searching for values and for purposes.

In the end she is defeated largely by her own lack of self-realization. She breaks off with Börje who clearly in a few years will be just as confused and aimless as her father. She destroys the files in which she has been documenting the shortcomings of the Swedish social system, and she admits her inadequacy to cope with the idea of nonviolence. She rejects her father and cannot cope with the ideas expressed by Yevtushenko and King. And to top it all off, she is made miserable by a case of scabies.

Sjöman's use of the age-old device of the play within a play functions as something of a conjurer's trick in which he is constantly reminding us he has nothing up his sleeve. But there is always the specter of another camera crew behind the camera crew we see, filming the film within the film. Sjöman's magicianship is highly deceptive and leads one to suspect that, regardless of the truth or falsehood of Ernest Riffe's* accusations of Ingmar Bergman, Bergman has taught his former apprentice, Sjöman, well.

Sjöman, like Bergman, has a number of conjurer's tricks up his sleeve, with which he often convinces his audience they are seeing (or believing) one thing when they are actually seeing (or should be believing) another. But clearly Sjöman the fictional film director is used by the real Sjöman to help him make a major point—which seems to me to be this: all the pressing social problems mankind is faced with must be handled by ordinary human beings—and ordinary human beings are terribly fallible, prone to error, and therefore—God help us all! This point is made rather subtly in the *Yellow* film and then slammed home in the *Blue*. In both films, Sjöman, the young 42-year-old director, is irritable, a little erratic, condescending—in a word, a fallible human.

Now a brief word about sex. In the *Yellow* film we find out what men and women look like without clothes. We are also shown a little of what men and women have been doing since before *Homo sapiens* began. Since without

such actions humanity would not exist, I think it is possible to argue that the sex act itself is important in the general scheme of things and thus a legitimate subject for an artist. But, in addition, Sjöman is saying something about the so-called new morality and is making a powerful argument for sexual equality for women. But why don't we just do away with censorship and stop having to justify, on the wrong grounds, such obviously worthy films as *I Am Curious*?

The acting in the film is excellent. But this may be in part due to Sjöman's tricks with the film within the film. We never really know when Lena and Börje are supposed to be themselves, or to be pretending to be themselves, or to be playing roles. Peter Lindgren, who plays Rune, is utterly believable. And Lena Neyman is a real departure from the usual concept of a film star, confused and filled with contradictions. But she comes across as a believable human—loaded with charm. And it is indeed refreshing to see a rather plump, non-glamorous woman in the leading role in a movie. One is indeed convinced that sex appeal can exist without the typical slick, sexed-up image usually created in the movies. That she sometimes comes across as a cardboard character is a fault of the director, not Lena.

Both the *Yellow* and *Blue* films were shot in black and white with a blimped 35mm Arriflex camera. Such a camera is heavy enough so that it must be mounted on a tripod. Not even the documentary sequences were shot with a hand-held camera. The impact of the *I Am Curious* films is in no way dependent on such "now" techniques as jump cuts, hand-held cameras, or extremely short shots. In fact Sjöman's film technique, although highly competent, does not call attention to itself at all. He tends toward realistic lighting effects and the sets and costuming are rigorously naturalistic. As a matter of fact, I suspect the footage was entirely shot on location and used no sets at all.

I do not believe at all Sjöman's protestation that he shot over 300,000 feet of film without a script. He may indeed have been using John Cassavetes-type improvised performances, but he bloody well knew *exactly* what he was after.

*Riffe is a Swedish critic who is particularly critical, for his own very personal reasons, of Ingmar Bergman.

(Lena's interviews, of course, could not be scripted. But Sjöman told her what questions to ask.) And what resulted, the *Yellow* and *Blue* films as a single unit, may well be one of the most important films of our time.

I AM CURIOUS (BLUE)

A yellow cross, by itself, is one thing. Place it on a blue background and it becomes the flag of Sweden. *I Am Curious (Yellow)* placed on the background of *I Am Curious (Blue)* becomes something quite different from *I Am Curious (Yellow)* taken alone.

I confess to having had a feeling of disbelief when I first heard Sjöman's claim that he could not adequately say all he had to say in a single film of relatively ordinary length. Other filmmakers have made the same claim, but such assertions are extremely difficult to evaluate. The original version of Von Stroheim's *Greed* can never be reconstructed. Who knows what Eisenstein had in mind when he shot the 100,000 feet of film that later became *Thunder Over Mexico*?²

I saw the *I Am Curious* films in a single sitting in the Sandrews preview room—a room which is one of the locations shown in the film. To reach the preview room I rode in the elevator in which Lena Neyman and Vilgot Sjöman are riding as the film opens. I sat in the preview room for over four hours. At the end of the four hours I was convinced that Sjöman does not go far enough in his claim that the two films are necessary to accomplish his purpose. Sjöman says that the films can be seen separately and that it doesn't matter much which you see first. I think they should be seen together and that *Yellow* should precede *Blue*. Ordinarily I regard the double feature as anathema, but with this film—or these films—it takes on a new meaning. Unfortunately, distributors and exhibitors will make more money showing the films at different times.

Sjöman says that in *I Am Curious (Blue)* he is treating the same subject matter from a different point of view—and he does not specify what point of view he is talking about. The

implied question does not have a simple answer and the answer varies with the level of meaning one is talking about.

In the *Yellow* film much emphasis is placed upon Sjöman's perceptions of social ills. The relations between the characters in the film are developed as an effect of the social forces impinging upon the people.

I Am Curious (Blue) is much more concerned with the relations between people (cause) and the implications of these relations for the social structure of the nation (effect).

Yellow is a man's film—*Blue* is a woman's film. *Yellow* is Sjöman's film. *Blue* is Lena's.

Structurally the films are quite similar. In both Sjöman begins with an exposition of his understanding of Swedish social ills: direct and forceful in *Yellow* and much more subtle in *Blue*. In both films Lena is shown in her involvement with people, in the locale of Stockholm. In both her initial role is that of questioner, gadfly, social dissident. In both she leaves Stockholm and goes out into the country, searching for something. In *Yellow* she is searching for self-control and for a value system. In *Blue* she is again searching for values but also for her mother. Or for a mother-image.

Both films end with her return to the city and with disillusionment.

Yellow is about class structure, nonviolence, and value systems. *Blue* is about religion, the prison system, and sex. Much of the publicity about *Yellow* has described it as a "sex film." For example, the *New York Times* carried a headline—"U.S. Court Clears Swedish Sex Film." (November 27, 1968) But the explicit depiction of the sex act it contains is subservient to the main issues considered in the film. The *Blue* film does not contain nearly as much explicit sexual material but sex and its implications are the major thematic materials of the film.

In *Yellow* Sjöman has indicated in the film about the making of the film that the director and the principal male actor, Börje, are in conflict over the affections of Lena. In *Blue* this conflict runs through the film but Lena has no contact with Börje in the film within the film at all.